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ABSTRACT

This speech by the United States Secretary of Education questions why so many American students are failed by the nation's educational systems. The speech cites data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) which finds that fewer than a third of the country's fourth graders can read proficiently at grade level. It also reports that the total average scores are flat, and that after decades of "business-as-usual school reform," too many of the nation's children still cannot read. The speech focuses on research-based reading instruction as a solution to these problems. It states that the National Reading Panel reached several conclusions about teaching reading: (1) teaching phonemic awareness to children significantly improves their reading; (2) understanding the relations between sounds and letters helps students from K-6th grade and children having difficulty learning to read; (3) fluent readers are able to read orally with speed, accuracy, and proper expression; (4) vocabulary development, background knowledge, text comprehension strategies are all critical to the development of reading comprehension; and (5) guided oral reading procedures that include guidance from teachers, peers, or parents have a significant and positive impact on word recognition, fluency, and comprehension. The paper explains that President Bush is committed to ensuring that every child can read by the third grade, and that his budget would create a $900 million Reading First initiative which will translate the research to classroom activities and to student performance. It also discusses Head Start and other early reading programs. (NKA)

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Speeches and Testimony

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Remarks as prepared for delivery by
U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige

International Reading Association

New Orleans, Louisiana
May 1, 2001

Speaker Frequently Deviates from Prepared Text

Our country is blessed with thousands of excellent teachers and administrators in schools around America. As Henry Adams said, "A teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence ends." I had many great teachers as a child, including my mother, and I worked with many great teachers in Houston. I know that all of them affect eternity.

While there are pockets of excellence around America, due in great part to the hard work of dedicated teachers, there are still children in America who are being left behind. Our system is still failing too many students.

American colleges are excellent, but nearly a third of our college freshmen must take remedial courses. This suggests that primary and secondary schools are not preparing students for college. There are many problem areas, but the one area the President and I consider most central is reading.

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The first NAEP results released by the National Center for Educational Statistics since I became Secretary were reading scores for our fourth grade students nationally. The scores were, frankly, disappointing. After decades of business-as-usual school reform, too many of our nation's children still cannot read.

According to the NAEP data, fewer than a third of our fourth graders can read proficiently at grade level. In fact, nearly 70% of inner-city and rural fourth graders cannot read at even a basic level.

If you look more closely at the data, you notice the total average scores are flat. You also see a persistent achievement gap between ethnic groups. But, while better students are getting better, the most disturbing thing is that the worst students are getting worse. In spite of federal aid targeted toward helping disadvantaged children, we are not making progress in teaching reading.

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President Bush considers reading to be the foundation of all learning. In fact, he says "literacy is the new civil right." He's right. The President's budget more than triples funding for reading. Over 5 years, he would invest $5 billion to ensure that every child in America can read by the 3rd grade.

It is estimated that at least ten million children have difficulty learning to read. 10 to 15 percent of those children eventually drop out of high school, and only 2 percent complete a four-year program of college.

The solution to these problems is research-based reading instruction. We know more than ever before how to teach reading, and more important, we know that with those methods, we can teach every child to read and to learn. Accordingly, the President's plan puts an end to past practices of throwing money blindly at reading; instead, his Reading First and Early Reading First programs invest in programs selected and delivered by states, districts, and schools, but only on programs that are informed by science and research showing us what works.

The National Reading Panel screened more than 100,000 studies of reading and developed a rigorous research standard to determine if findings of those studies were ready for use in the classroom.

The panel found that the most effective course of reading instruction includes explicit and systematic instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary development, reading fluency, and reading comprehension strategies.

The National Reading Panel reached several major conclusions. First, teaching phonemic awareness to children significantly improves their reading. Second, understanding the relation between sounds and letters helps students from K-6th grade and children having difficulty learning to read. Third, fluent readers are able to read orally with speed, accuracy, and proper expression. Fluency is one critical factor necessary for reading comprehension. Fourth, vocabulary development, background knowledge, text comprehension strategies are all critical to the development of reading comprehension. Fifth, guided oral reading procedures that include guidance from teachers, peers or parents have a significant and positive impact on word recognition, fluency, and comprehension.

In other words, reading cannot be picked up the way speech can. It must be taught. Studies also show that it is much easier to learn to read before 4th grade than after, so reading should be taught early, and every child should learn to read before the fourth grade.

President Bush is committed to ensuring that every child can read by the third grade. To help meet this goal, his budget would create a $900

million Reading First initiative. This initiative will translate the research I just described to classroom activities and to student performance by providing funds to states and local education agencies-or districts-to implement comprehensive, research-based, proven methods of teaching reading.

Reading First is a grant program that would fund and encourage state and local reading programs. States and local districts will have access to funds to implement comprehensive, science-based reading programs in kindergarten through second grade.

Because reading is so central to all forms of learning, the Reading First initiative gives states both the funds and the tools they need to eliminate the reading deficit.

Better reading will improve education throughout life. More than half the students placed in special education classes are identified as learning-disabled. For as many as 80 percent of them, reading is their primary difficulty. If we can prevent or solve their reading problems, we can keep them out of special education classes.

Better pre-reading programs should mean fewer children in special education, fewer children who disrupt their classrooms, and fewer children dropping out of high school. After all, children who can't read become frustrated with their own progress and distract their classmates who can read.

I am delighted, by the way, that the President has chosen one of the experts in early reading research, Susan Neuman, to be Assistant Secretary of Education for Elementary and Secondary Education and look forward to the start of her Senate confirmation process.

Some children have a reading disadvantage even before they learn to read. Research shows us that upper-income students start school knowing 20,000 words, while lower-income students know only 4,000 words. The kind of the conversations they have with their parents shapes the vocabulary they bring to the classroom. One of the best things we can do for reading, naturally, is to improve the literary environment for lower-income children through pre and early reading programs.

Research shows that prevention is better than intervention. If children begin to learn how to manipulate and add sounds as young children, furthering their reading skills will be easier. So to expand the effectiveness of the Reading First program, the President has proposed Early Reading First to give Reading First states the option to receive funding to implement research-based reading programs in pre-school programs and Head Start programs.

Since Head Start serves 840,000 disadvantaged children, this could make

a major difference. The purpose of this program is to illustrate on a larger scale recent research findings that children taught pre-reading and math skills in pre-school enter school ready to learn reading and math.

The Early Reading First Program, with $75 million in competitive grants to school districts and non-profit organizations, can work for you. The funds will be accessible, the support is plentiful. President Bush understands how important reading is and wants to make sure that schools and teachers have all the tools they need to teach effectively.

Early reading problems can't be fixed by schools alone. Families, churches, and community organizations play important roles, too. I will be working with the new Office of Faith-based and Community Organizations and with the Partnership for Family Involvement at the Department to share reading research with community organizations, pediatricians, faith-based organizations, families, and parents to help them understand how they can help children prepare for reading, and how important their help is.

Another important part of ensuring that our kids learn how to read and how to succeed is making sure our teachers are trained properly. The President and I are committed to improving teacher training. That's why he would triple the funding for teacher training.

His budget would spend nearly $2.6 billion to improve teacher quality. That's a 17% increase over last year. The funding program would give states increased flexibility. It would ask states to use the funds for professional development that is grounded in scientifically based research, tied to state or local standards, of sufficient intensity and duration to affect teaching performance, and directly related to the subjects taught.

When we have so much science that tells us how to teach, and yet our NAEP scores reflect no improvement on average, and even more disappointing performance for our minority and low-income students, we know there is a gap between what we know and what we do. I want to work with you to bridge that gap-to bring what we know into the classroom so the next time we report on NAEP we can say that our children are-for the first time since the 1980s-learning to read.

In other words, we need to get beyond just feeling good about teaching and make sure our teachers are doing what we know works.

Teaching all children to read by the third grade is a bold goal. It is at the heart of an even bolder goal: no child left behind. Until now, every society in the world has written off some of its children as students who "can't learn." Even today, our system selects some children who are not held to the same standards as most children. George W. Bush understands the problem, and he won't stand for it. If Congress will enact

his program, he will insist that no child is left behind.

It's an audacious plan that will fundamentally change the way our nation approaches primary and secondary education, but we know it can be done, for two reasons. First, it is based on commonsense principles. Second, it has already shown results in Texas. Let me discuss both of these reasons.

The principles behind the plan are high standards, annual assessment, accountability for results, flexibility, local control, and expanded parental choice.

Let me discuss each one briefly. High standards will replace what the President calls the soft bigotry of low expectations with the expectation that every child can and should succeed. Annual assessment will measure how we are meeting those standards, and will give useful data on student performance to teachers, schools, and officials. Accountability for results means we won't just send money to schools; we'll demand real progress. No more NAEP reports like the one this spring.

Flexibility and local control will give some districts funds to meet their need for more teachers; while others use them to meet their need for better teacher training. It would be silly to make these decisions in Washington. Schools should have more say in how you run your classroom than I should. Finally, expanded parental choice, because in most cases, no one is going to take a greater interest in a child's education than the parents. Parents will have more information and more options under the President's plan.

I said earlier that we know these principles work. But you don't need to take my word for it as the former superintendent in Houston, or even President Bush's as the former governor of Texas. A national organization of CEO's, called the Business Roundtable, commissioned a report on education reform in Texas. The report found that the principles I just mentioned dramatically improved education in Texas. Reforms in Texas produced real results for all Texas students. According to the numbers, white Texans are improving; Black Texans are improving; and Hispanic Texans are improving.

On fourth grade reading, from 1994 to 1998, white scores improved by 5 points, black scores by 6 points, and Hispanic scores by 6 points. The report said, "If African American eighth graders everywhere wrote as well as their peers in Texas, the national achievement gap between White and African American eighth graders would be cut in half."

In Texas, President Bush and I wanted to help children achieve better. We worked with dedicated teachers and administrators and produced results.

We want to do the same for America. The principles that form the President's No Child Left Behind plan are the principles that worked in Texas.

Until President Bush, America never had a President who was as committed to reading, whether you measure this commitment in terms of knowledge, resources, or determination to help every child reach the same high standard.

Later today, you will hear about schools that bring children up to high standards. Joe Johnson, the new director of Title I, will recognize the 95 exemplary Title I schools. These 95 schools have reached and exceeded state standards for progress, and I want to hold them up as examples for other Title I schools.

Einstein said that the definition of insanity is to keep doing the same thing over and over and expect different results.

We've spent a lot of federal money on reading programs over the past quarter century, and we have little to show for it. The time for repeating our efforts has passed; the time for change has come. We are increasing the money, but more important, we are changing the culture and changing the system.

We need you to be our partners-to put the latest research to work in your classrooms; to teach children to read early and well.

Thank you for your hard work.

We must all work together to ensure that no child is left behind.

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